

Pearl Harbor attack energized American resolve



Ed Vezzy talks about his escape from the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor 60 years ago tomorrow. SUN photo

By Richard Walter

In less than 24 hours it will be exactly 60 years since the "Day of Infamy" literally turned life upside down for a current resident of Pagosa Springs.

"I was lying in my bunk arguing with my roommate about whether we should go swimming or eat breakfast first," said Ed Vezzy, then a gunnery officer at Pearl Harbor, aboard the doomed battleship USS Oklahoma.

"Those were lazy, easy days," he said. "We knew we'd eventually have to fight the Japanese but there was a belief they'd never attack here . . . you can't sink a battleship with bombs."

"And then," he said, "the general alarm went off. We thought, 'it's going to be a heck of a day if they're running an air drill in Pearl Harbor at 8 a.m. on a Sunday.' Then the Officer of the Deck came on and left no doubt. With a great deal of profanity he let us know we were under attack by Japanese aircraft and call to battle stations was sounded."

Vezzy said he was in pajama pants, some brand new shoes and a cap as he made his way to the 3.0-inch battery he commanded. "All our ready ammo had been sent below and one of the first torpedoes to hit took out the electric power so we couldn't raise more." (Officially, the Oklahoma took five torpedo hits and two bomb blasts).

As the ship began to list to port, Vezzy tried to stay with the roll. "I followed it clear around until she rolled, half in the channel and half in the shallower tethered area."

The Oklahoma was done as a fighting ship. She never went completely under, the starboard side staying above water line.

Wearing the pajama bottoms, moccasins, the new hat and carrying a .45 automatic, Vezzy said, "I asked the executive officer for permission to leave the ship." Sounds funny now, he admitted, "but there were strict rules of conduct."

He went into the oil laden water and swam to the USS Maryland to which the Oklahoma had been tethered. The Maryland, protected by the other ship from torpedo runs, had taken only one bomb hit and was fighting back.

With the burning fuel following him, Vezzy was hauled aboard, nearly naked, and sent into a salt water shower. A

chief boatswain's mate got him some underwear and someone else rounded up some dungaree pants and a cutoff shirt which was to become his uniform.

The Maryland's commanding officer ordered all survivors of other ships who had come aboard to man a small boat and make an ammunition run. Vezey took the craft ashore but on arrival the survivors could find no one in the ammo dump to load the boat.

"We did it ourselves and, realizing others would need ammo, we sent the boat back with a skeleton crew and stayed ashore as a working party to provide ammo for other crews," he said.

For some reason, he said, the sub base "cut off our credit and we couldn't get any uniforms or other clothing because we had no money. Everything went down with the ship." After a week of waiting, wearing the same dungarees, an officer took him into Honolula for uniform fitting.

Nine months later, he said, "after having no leave or liberty, I asked permission to go into town."

Then came the newest problem. "They had no record of my existence. Who's Ed Vezey? was the big question. I told them my story and hinted I'd like to go somewhere, preferably back to sea."

The CO, he said, apparently had been keeping his existence a secret so he could utilize his skills. On return to base he was summoned to the commander's office and summarily dispatched to a "tramp steamer plying its way around the South Pacific."

"I got dysentery on Guadalcanal," he said, "and the medic told me that was my ticket out of there. I was transferred to 'destination unknown' which turned out to be the Navy hospital in Noumea, New Caledonia." After 27 months in the combat zone, Vezey said, "I wanted to go somewhere else. When the local personnel officer heard that, he told them to get me on the first available transportation back to the U.S."

From then on he served as gunnery officer on the flagship of Adm. Kelly Turner (USS Rocky Mount). He was there through the Kwajalein, Marianas, and Philippine campaigns before being ordered back to the states again, this time to command a repair vessel with a crew of 1,000.

When the war ended, he was expecting to be relieved and to leave the service. "Every guy who came to relieve me saw the kind of ship and exercised his points to get discharged and I was still there."

Finally, he said, as commanding officer of the ship he wrote discharge orders for himself and found his way to Houston, TX., for mustering out. There was some challenge to his authority to discharge himself, he said, "but eventually it was done and I was on my way home."

Then it was back to college to finish his degree, which he achieved in 1947 and went to work for General Electric. He retired there in 1984 but still works for the company part time.

He has been a full-time resident of Pagosa Springs for the past 10 years.

How does the attack on Pearl Harbor compare with the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and our ongoing war on terrorism in Afghanistan?

"There is no comparison," he said.

"We (at Pearl Harbor) were attacked by people we knew, people we could see. The first plane going over with red spots on it defined the enemy for us."

Those who died in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, he said, "were innocent civilians. Most had no known enemies. They had dreams and hopes and wishes to fulfill. All that was denied them."

His ship, the Oldahoma, lost more than 400 crewmen. "They were trained to go to war," he said. "Civilians working in a skyscraper had no warning. We knew that someday we'd have to fight."

"Perhaps the only common factor," he said, "is the intensity. The United States reacted to Pearl Harbor as an intensely unified nation. We are reacting to 9/11 with a similar intensity producing a nation united."

"We, as a military unit, were fair game to the Japanese, even if it was a surprise attack. The innocents in the World Trade Towers were not a logical target for any person who considers himself or herself a human being."

At Pearl Harbor, he said, "We wondered who had dreamed up this drill (before the certainty of attack became known). In New York and at the Pentagon, there was no drill other than death."

So far as he knows, Vezey said, he is the only Pearl Harbor survivor living in the area. "I'm not a professional veteran," he said. "I had a duty to perform and it put me in Pearl Harbor at a bad time. I survived and Pagosa Country makes that survival easy to accept."